

# Altered states

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**O**TTAWA — You don't have to look far to see the transforming power of photography. Before the 1880s, artists had enormous difficulty capturing the image of animals in motion. Running horses were painted with legs outstretched in the "hobbyhorse" position. These stiff, awkward shapes were an annoying reminder of the limitations of the human eye.

But after Eadweard Muybridge published his stop-action photographs of horses and other animals in movement, artists never painted them that way again. And the average person never looked at a horse quite the same way either.

Photography has transformed our perception of much besides animals. War (Robert Capa), landscape (Ansel Adams), poverty (Dorothea Lange) and outer space have all been given a perceptual makeover.

In fact, it's hard to think of a significant person or event in this century that hasn't somehow been given new meaning and context through the medium of photography.

The proposition that there is ritual in photography is a little harder to defend. One could say that because people take photographs of significant events in their lives with predictable regularity, and that the process of picture-taking follows an established pattern, this makes it a "ritual."

But the only sense in which photog-

raphy approaches the sacred — the central connotation of ritual — is in its power to turn the object of its focus into an icon, a discrete object that projects a sense of transcendence and otherworldliness. It's a tall order which practitioners of this, or any other, can bring off. But in this small ex-

hibit of 61 works by 15 photographers, there are a few examples.

Called *Rituals and Transformations*, this exhibition was curated by the National Gallery's Ann Thomas and attempts to explore different ways in which photography can alter our perception of people, objects and nature.

And to prove her point, Thomas has cast her net widely, selecting works by photographers from Canada, Germany, Japan, Spain, Mexico and the U.S.

The photographers are equally diverse, ranging from Evergon and Lynne Cohen, both of whom have Montreal connections, to Dieter Appelt, a German photographer whose work often refers to his wartime experiences as a young child.

## Extraordinary portraits

But what this group has in common, a gallery news release explains, is the way these artists "transform, through the ritual of photography, the encounter with the commonplace into an experience of the whimsical, the tragic, the fantastic and the metaphysical."

Among the most striking photos in this show are the extraordinary portraits of Gary Schneider, a South African-born American. His large-format black-and-whites are cropped so closely that his subject's faces fill the entire picture plane and the intensity of his scrutiny borders on violation.

The camera's focus fades in and out. An apparently crisp edge blurs into a patch of light. One part of a face projects out of the plane, another recedes.

Whether it's the mobile quality of the light or the impression that these faces are trapped in a purgatory of shadows, these are photographs that will haunt your memory for a very long time.

The sense of the sacred is also in evidence in the work of Japanese photographer Miyako Ishiuchi. Her deceptively simple shots of women's hands and feet take the familiar and the commonplace and teach us to appreciate and perhaps even revere it.

Plain, unremarkable bodily extremities are bathed in a graduated mantle of muted light. To make the point that there is nothing extraordinary here, Ishiuchi has titled the photos with her subjects' job descriptions: Clothing Shop Manager, Beauty Salon Assistant and so on.

The approach is essentially Buddhist: elevate and sanctify the humblest products of the earth. It is somehow reassuring to see this resilient notion represented in what is, for the most part, a modernist, secular show.

That secular attitude takes an ironic turn with the work of Joan Fontcuberta and John Pfahl. Fontcuberta is a Spanish photographer who does hilarious parodies of scientific studies.

His series of yellowing photographs, entitled *Centaurus Neandertalensis*, shows a pith-helmeted scientist in the African savannah examining a creature that looks like a baboon crossed with a deer. Anatomical drawings of the creature and a notebook with notations accompany the pictures.

Pfahl's *From the Very Rich Hours of*

a Compost Pile harks back to the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, the 15th-century luminously illustrated masterpiece that, among other things, shows the cycle of the seasons and its impact on the life of the peasantry.

Pfahl, in sardonic contrast, has photographed the progression of a compost pile. Not any compost pile, however, and not its putrid interior.

## Visitors can take self-portraits

Instead he gives us intensely colored peelings, choppings, discarded fruit and flowers strewn elegantly and randomly within the tightly cropped picture space. The results are, from a color and design standpoint, delightfully effective.

I suppose the point behind the exercise is to remind us that there are a few things that are constant: luxury, poverty, the beauty of the earth's bounty and the relentless march of time.

As an interesting bonus to the show the curators have included a digital camera in the exhibition space where, for a dollar, visitors can take self-portraits.

If they wish, they can add theirs to the grid of photos in the outside hallway. This is the kind of ritual that will eventually transform the gallery into a people-friendly place.

■ *Rituals and Transformation: An Exhibition of Photographs* continues at the National Gallery of Canada, 380 Sussex Drive., until Oct. 29. Admission is free. Until Oct. 9, the gallery is open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., except Thursdays when it closes at 8 p.m. Phone: (613) 990-1985.

